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Bulgaria Knew of Plot on Pope, CIA Concludes

Sofia Had Advance Information, but Neither It Nor Moscow Instigated Attack, Agency Believes

By ROBERT C. TOTH, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—The Central Intelligence Agency has concluded—with what is said to be 99% certainty—that officials of the Bulgarian government had advance knowledge of the assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II by Turkish terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca, with whom Bulgarian intelligence agents were working in Rome.

However, the CIA is also convinced that neither the Bulgarians nor the Soviet Union instigated the attack, which occurred 20 months ago, agency officials have said in reports within the U.S. government.

No "smoking gun," or absolute proof of Bulgarian complicity has been found by U.S. intelligence officials. Nonetheless, The Times has learned, CIA specialists believe that Bulgarian intelligence agents knew Agca was bent on killing the Pope but regarded him as an unstable person who probably would be captured.

'Accessories Before the Fact'

Thus, CIA analysts have reasoned, the Bulgarians would not have actively involved themselves in Agca's plotting, even if they had been interested in such an assassination.

"The CIA conclusion makes the Bulgarians—and by extension the Soviets, who control the Bulgarians—accessories before the fact," a source said. "It dilutes their guilt, but not very much."

If this CIA assessment of the still-simmering controversy is adopted by the White House, President Reagan would probably still feel free to take part in a summit meeting with Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov—something an American President would have found difficult to do if direct Soviet involvement in an attack on the Pope had been established.

Andropov was head of the Soviet

secret police and intelligence network, the KGB, when John Paul was shot. Thus, Andropov would have had the ultimate responsibility for the attack if—as some have alleged—the KGB had ordered the killing of the Polish Pope because of his support of the Polish independent trade union Solidarity against the Communist regime in Warsaw.

"Reagan could never meet Andropov if it was proved unequivocally that the Bulgarians, and therefore the Soviet KGB, was behind the plot to kill the Pope," a U.S. official said. "Even if a strategic arms agreement were negotiated, it would be politically impossible for Reagan to sit down with Andropov."

"It would be like the U-2 affair in

reverse," another American official said, "a watershed in Soviet-American relations that would have effects for a decade."

After the American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960, Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev withdrew an invitation to President Dwight D. Eisenhower to visit Moscow. It was not until 12 years later, in 1972, that Richard M. Nixon became the first postwar U.S. President to go to the Soviet Union.

The extremely sensitive nature of a possible Bulgarian-Soviet link to the assassination attempt has led to suggestions by some intelligence analysts that the United States is deliberately steering away from blaming the Kremlin for the attack on the Pope to avoid worsening Soviet-American relations. Marvin Kalb, the NBC News correspondent who has been in the forefront in reporting the "Bulgarian connection," said in a broadcast last week that CIA officials in Rome have actively discouraged reporters from pursuing the issue.

Anti-Communism a Factor

The Administration's deep anti-communism and antipathy to Moscow would seem likely to push it toward exposing the Soviets for such a terrorist act, however, instead of trying to cover it up, a U.S. official said. And there are indications that senior Administration officials moved in that direction, at least initially.

For example, Alexander M. Haig Jr., who was secretary of state when the shooting occurred and who viewed the Kremlin as the prime supporter of international terrorism, ordered an urgent search for evidence of Soviet complicity even before the first signs of a "Bulgarian connection" appeared.

CIA Director William J. Casey was reportedly sympathetic last year to arguments, brought back from Rome by an influential Senate Intelligence Committee staff member, that the Soviets ultimately were guilty of the crime.

Several criticisms of the CIA conclusions have been made by U.S. officials and others. For one thing, very little evidence has been unearthed to connect Agca to gun and drug trafficking, unlike the other main Bulgarian and Turkish characters involved, it was said. There is overwhelming evidence, on the other hand—including his admitted assassination of a moderate Turkish editor—that Agca could be hired to kill.

Would Protect Security

More broadly, critics of the CIA assessment find it implausible that the Bulgarians would have permitted such an operation to go forward if they believed Agca was likely to get caught and thus might expose his links, whatever their nature, to Bulgarian intelligence.

Publicly, the CIA has had no comment on stories dealing with the issue. The matter is an international legal issue in the hands of the Italian government, a spokesman said.

According to sources, this is a government-wide policy based on a decision made at the highest levels of the Administration several months ago that no American impetus would be given to the assassination story for fear that it would play into Soviet hands.